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**NATIONAL SATELLITE CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS ILLINOIS' PRESCHOOL
PROGRESS AND PLANS; 12 EVENTS HELD THROUGHOUT STATE**

CHICAGO (Nov. 10, 2005) – Hundreds of civic and community leaders, early childhood providers, parents and child advocates gathered in cities across the state to discuss how to provide voluntary, quality preschool for all Illinois children and to take part in a national satellite conference on the preschool movement.

The satellite conference, called “Engaging Leaders in the Pre-K Movement,” capitalized on the input and experience of participants through activities and interactive segments that connected local sites to a national presentation and a panel of distinguished leaders.

Events were held in Bensenville, Bloomington, Carterville, Chicago, East Peoria, Evanston, Granite City, Moline, Orland Park, Quincy, Rockford and Springfield. Local hosts were CEDA Orland Park Head Start, Child Care Connections at Illinois Central College, Child Care Network of Evanston, Child Care Resource and Referral at John A. Logan College, Children’s Home and Aid Society, Community Connections, Early Childhood Coalition, Early Learning Initiative, El Valor, Heartland Head Start, Illinois Head Start Association, Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, McLean County All Our Kids Network, Rockford Early Learning Council, Springfield Urban League, United Way of Central Illinois, West Central Child Care Connection, YWCA Child Care Solutions, YWCA Childcare Resource & Referral and YWCA Child Care Solutions.

The meetings were co-sponsored by Early Learning Illinois (www.earlylearningillinois.org), a statewide advocacy and public awareness campaign led by Action for Children, Ounce of Prevention Fund and Voices for Illinois Children, and Pre-K Now (www.preknow.org), a national public education and advocacy organization.

“Providing young children with quality early learning experiences is critical and gives them the foundation they need to succeed in school and in life,” said Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children. “Without opportunities for early learning, too many children start school behind their peers and never catch up. We need to make sure all children are healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed by the time they enter school.”

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Illinois was featured prominently in the national presentation with interviews of Illinois State Board of Education Chairman Jesse Ruiz, state Sen. John Millner, Action for Children President Maria Whelan and Chicago Public Schools Early Childhood Officer Barbara Bowman.

Meeting participants discussed that Illinois has made great progress in getting policymakers to focus on early childhood education, but much more work needs to be done.

“Research shows that too many children are already behind their peers by the time they reach kindergarten,” said Harriet Meyer, president of Ounce of Prevention Fund. “We must continue to speak up to close the unforgiving and unforgivable achievement gap, and give every child a level chance to do better in school – and to do better in life.”

Illinois has been recognized as a national leader in the preschool movement. Gov. Rod Blagojevich and state legislators have increased funding for early childhood education by \$90 million the past three years, allowing another 25,000 at-risk children ages birth to 5 have access to state-supported pre-Kindergarten programs and other services. Areas with the highest need, including Latino communities, have been targeted with the new funding.

The state’s support is important now more than ever because the early childhood care and education industry is vital to Illinois’ economy. It generates \$2.12 billion in gross receipts each year and employs 56,000 individuals while allowing parents to work.

“We applaud the governor and lawmakers for having the vision to invest in what matters – children’s early care and education,” said Maria Whelan, president of Action for Children. “By investing now, they are ensuring a better future, saving money, and most importantly making a difference in the lives of working families and their children.”

Early Learning Illinois aims to ensure that all children are healthy and happy, eager to learn and ready to succeed by the time they enter kindergarten. The campaign is led by Action for Children, Ounce of Prevention Fund and Voices for Illinois Children, with strong support from Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois, Chicago Metropolis 2020 and more than 125 other local, regional and statewide organizations throughout Illinois.

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